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MOSQUE AND IDENTITY FORMATION OF MUSLIM ADOLESCENTS IN THE UNITED STATES: A SOMALI CASE IN COLUMBUS, OHIO

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of the mosque in identity formation among Somali adolescents in Columbus, Ohio. The research was conducted at a large, ethnically Somali mosque in Columbus, utilizing the methods of participant observation and ethnographic interviewing. Two main trends were observed in adolescent Somali American identity formation. One trend was for research participants to cultivate a distinctly Muslim American identity by integrating their Somali ethnic, American, and Islamic identities. Mosque participation played a key role in their ability and willingness to synthesize these identities. However, adolescents in this group could be divided into two opposing sub-categories as integrating to the American society with their Muslim salient identity versus distancing away from the American culture and society. The second over-arching trend that emerged in the research was for Somali American adolescents to experience identity conflict between their Muslim, Somali, and American identities. This group, unlike the first, struggled and failed to reconcile the various norms and commitments of these identities and it seemed that mosque participation deepened this identity struggle for adolescents in this group.

Keywords: Mosque, Identity Formation, Muslim Adolescents, Somalia, American Islam

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AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİ'NDE CAMİ VE MÜSLÜMAN GENÇLERİN KİMLİK İNŞASI: COLUMBUS, OHIO SOMALİ ÖRNEĞİ

ÖZ

Bu makale Ohio eyaletinin Columbus şehrindeki Somalili gençlerin kimlik inşalarında caminin rolünü ele almaktadır. Bu çalışma Columbus'taki en büyük Somali Camisi'nde katılımcı gözlem ve etnografik mülakat teknikleri istihdam edilerek gerçekleştirilmiştir. Çalışma neticesinde, Somalili gençlerin kimlik gelişimlerinde iki ana eğilim gözlemlenmiştir. Bunlardan birisi, araştırmaya konu olan gençlerin Somali, Amerikan ve Müslüman kimliklerini mezcederek kendine özgü bir Müslüman Amerikalı kimliği geliştirmeleridir. Bununla birlikte, bu gruptaki gençler birbirine zıt iki alt-kategoriye ayrılabilir: Müslüman baskın/aslî kimlikleriyle Amerikan toplumuna entegre olanlar *vs.* Müslüman baskın/aslî kimlikleriyle Amerikan kültürü ve toplumundan kendilerini dışlayanlar. Bu kimlikleri sentezlemede gösterdikleri kabiliyet ve istek noktasında camiye katılımın kilit bir rolü vardır. Bu çalışmada ortaya çıkan iki ana eğilimden diğeri ise, Somalili gençlerin Müslüman, Somali ve Amerikan kimlikleri arasında kimlik çatışması deneyimlemeleridir. Birincisine nazaran bu gruptakiler birbirinden farklı ahlaki ve davranış tarzına sahip bu kimlikleri birbirleriyle uzlaştırmada zorlanmışlar ve başarısız olmuşlardır. Bu noktada, camiye katılımın bu kimlik çatışmasını daha da derinleştirdiği gözlemlenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cami, Kimlik İnşası, Müslüman Gençler, Somali, Amerikan İslamı

INTRODUCTION

After 9/11, many Muslim American adolescents have grappled with whether and how to reject or maintain a Muslim identity in the face of the many social repercussions directed towards Muslims, including issues of heightened surveillance and profiling on the part of government organizations. These repercussions have:

> resulted both in a rise of anti-U.S. sentiment across the Islamic world and in the growing alienation of Muslim Americans inside the United States itself… Over the coming decade, Muslims will likely carve out a distinct identity that is decisively based on a perception of the "other." In doing so, they will develop a third way, one that allows them to embrace their religion while integrating when necessary into American society (Abdo 2005:17).

This statement is the starting point for me to explore *this* "*third way*" in which American Muslims negotiate the fusion of their Muslim and American identities. Elsewhere in her commentary, Abdo highlights the ways in which some Muslims in America will jettison religious commitment in favor of wholesale assimilation to mainstream U.S. culture, while others will reject integration with other Americans out of a fear of ostracism. The "third way" to which Abdo alludes is one that emerged among the Somali Muslim adolescents in Columbus, Ohio, who are the focus of the research presented here. This "third way" is a hybrid identity in which elements of being Muslim, American, and Somali shape the fundamental self of these Somali American immigrant teenagers, and in this analysis I call them "*integrators*" or "*mutualists*" as Sheikh labeled (forthcoming) between the three. Another pattern that emerged in Somali adolescent identity negotiation, however, was the belief that one must reject American identity in favor of retaining authentic Islamic identity, for those whom I called "*disintegrators*" or "*purists*" as Sheikh identified (forthcoming). These patterns, "*integration/mutualism*" and "*disintegration/purism*", will be the focus of analysis presented here. Finally, the role of mosque participation in facilitating the hybrid "Muslim American" identity formation will be examined as further evidence of the role of religious congregations in facilitating immigrant integration/disintegration into the host society.

Identity

Due to the complexity of life in the post-modern, globalized social structure that characterizes much of the industrialized world, identity has become a focus of research in many academic disciplines such as psychology, political science, social psychology, and sociology (Cerulo 1997; Howard 2000; Stryker and Burke 2000; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Cote and Levine 2002; Peek 2005; Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Burke and Stets 2009). In traditional societies, identity was the concept that was "assigned to individuals, rather than selected or adopted" (Howard 2000:367); whereas today it is "becoming" not "being" (Dillon 1999:250) for one because of his/her experiences and "an overwhelming pace of change in surrounding social contexts" (Howard 2000:367). For those whose lives crystallize the complexities and imperatives of globalization—immigrants—issues of identity are particularly salient. It is also the case that adolescence is a period of significant upheaval in one's

self-concept; adolescent immigrants, then, are a particularly compelling population in which to study the fundamental processes of identity negotiation.

One of the approaches investigating the process of identity negotiation and construction between one's self and the social organizations, or structures is "*Identity Theory*" developed by Sheldon Stryker (1980[2000]). Conceptualizing self as multifaceted and diverse, but organized, Stryker argues that role identities within a person's self must be organized in a salience hierarchy. He termed this organization as "identity salience hierarchy". Stryker defines identity salience as "the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation" (Stryker and Burke 2000:286; also in Stryker 1980[2000]; 2007; 2008; 2000). Identities are organized and ordered in a salience hierarchy because a person's self is considered multifaceted and diverse, but organized. Therefore, identities specifically are not situations, but are used in defining situations and thus "can be carried by persons into the many situations they experience, affecting conduct in those situations" (Stryker 2008:20). The consequence of the specification of self points to the following hypotheses of identity theory: "The higher the salience of an identity relative to other identities incorporated into the self, the greater the probability of behavioral choices in accord with the expectations attached to that identity" (Stryker and Burke 2000:286). The higher the salience of an identity "relative" to other identities, the probability will be larger that one will act on an expected behavior which is attached to that identity. Therefore, "role choice is hypothesized to be a consequence of identity salience" (Stryker 2008:20). In order to determine which identity is more salient among others and to find out the degree of social structures on a given identity as well, Stryker offers the concept of "commitment".

Commitment to a social network implies that individuals' social networking and relations to others in that network are dependent on the role that they play in that network and the particular identity that they carry with them in that particular role. The degree of commitment can be measured by the costs of losing one's social relations with others. There are two dimensions of commitment highlighting the issue of "costs". The first one is the quantitative or interactional commitment, which

involves the number of relationships that is associated with the given identity and networking relationships. The second is qualitative or affective commitment, which is "the depth of emotional attachment to particular sets of others in networks of relationships" (Stryker 2007:1093). To conclude, Stryker argues that the stronger the commitment to a particular identity, the greater and higher the identity is in one's identity salience hierarchy (1980 [2000]). Thus, "commitment is hypothesized to be the immediate source of salience attached to identities" (Stryker 2008:20).

Why Identity Theory?

The focus of this research, the role of the mosque in Somali adolescents' identity formation, led me to apply Stryker's identity theory. Since Stryker emphasizes the influence of social structures in identity theory, it enabled me to discuss the impact of the mosque on the identity saliences of Somali adolescents who attended mosque's activities. Specifically, I am addressing issues regarding the mosque's role in changing identities of adolescents who have multiple identities as Muslim, Somali, and American due to being educated and raised in America.

One cannot overlook the roles of Somali adolescents and their interaction with other adolescents, teachers, and adults in the mosque when they are developing their identities. Particularly when one considers that these Somali adolescents grow up and are educated in the United States, where individualism and the individual rights of a person are always advocated, the emphasis on the choice and interactions of Somali adolescents with others in the mosque become more significant when exploring their identity formation. The mosque provides a social context in which adolescents can perform role behaviors corresponding to their Muslim, Somali and black American identities, and their interactions with others in the mosque in turn affect the social and religious structure of the mosque. Stryker's identity theory becomes more applicable and useful for the objectives of this research.

Because the mosque is one of the major facilitator and the immediate source in the hierarchy of Somali adolescents' identity salience, in this section I now briefly review literature on mosque and its functions in the United States.

Identity, Immigration and Mosque

Immigrants throughout U.S. history have joined or founded religious organizations to express both their heritage identity and their commitment to establishing their religious tradition in a new country (Hirschman 2006). Through religious organizations, these communities have emphasized or reaffirmed a strong identity as a minority in the United States. However, Muslims in non-Muslim countries have to "reinvent what makes them Muslim" (Roy 2004), meaning that Muslims lose cultural or language characteristics which were directly tied to religion and which were the carrier of religion itself to the daily basis life in the homeland. Therefore, they have established institutions where they can perform their own cultural and language traits so that they could sustain their both religious and ethnic identities in the new land.

The mosque, for this reason, is both a sacred space and a social institution through which Muslims make statements about themselves and about their faith (Lotfi 2001). Handlin (1973) argues that religion is a bridge that connects the old world with the new. Faced with changes and challenges in every other aspect of their lives, immigrants often seek to recreate the religious institutions and faith of their homeland wherever they resettle. Religious congregations often serve different functions in the "host" society than they do in the country from which the immigrants migrated. Biondo states that mosques have different functions in the United States and "Western World" than the rest of the Islamic World (2006). The difference between a mosque in the United States and a mosque in Somalia, for example, is that mosques in the U.S. must do more than provide a place for prayer. Mosques and Islamic Centers in the U.S. context often aid in helping immigrants get settled in their new country while also maintaining their religious and ethnic identities (Biondo 2006). They are multi-functional places of business which consist of bookstores, cafeterias, a mortuary, wedding and tax preparation services, their own school, day care centers, basketball courts and youth sport leagues, language and citizenship classes. The Islamic Centers are places of worship as well as community centers (Rasdi 1998). Mosques in the United States, then, are not only places of worship, but also beneficial catalysts for change and meaningful social organizations (Kahera 2002).

Overall, mosques in the United States play a crucial role in immigrant efforts to maintain ethnic and religious identities, while also making sense of their new lives in a new country. Belonging to a particular mosque can be a way of connecting with other family members because most often, immigrants establish ties to their families through the mosque (Ehrkamp 2005). In the case of Somalis in Columbus, Ohio, the Somali-dominated mosque where this research took place functions to bind Somali families and their children to each other, the broader Somali community in the United States, and the growing Muslim American population. This last function is particularly relevant to the development of Somali teenager's "third way" Muslim American identities.

Data and Methods

The Somali Mosque of Columbus was established after 2000.[1] It is located in the Columbus neighborhood where the Somali community is most concentrated. It is an ethnically homogenous mosque, in that the board members of the mosque, the religious leadership, and the congregants are all ethnically Somali. The mosque's philosophical orientation to Islam is most aptly described as a Salafism based on a combination of Saudi-Wahhabi and Muslim Brotherhood concepts.[2]

I conducted 9 months of field research at this mosque from June 2009 and through February 2010. From July to mid-August, I spent 6 days a week in the mosque, for approximately 4-5 hours a day. After the school year resumed, I went to the mosque on the weekends for the remaining period of research, spending 4 hours per day on site. Over the

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1 All the names (mosque and adolescents) in this research are pseudonyms.

2 For instance, the original name of the mosque corresponds to one of the Islamic scholars from whom the Saudi-Wahhabi movement was inspired. In addition, in my initial meetings with the president of a Somali community organization and Somalis from other mosques, I was told that the Somali Mosque of Columbus follows the path of Saudi-Wahhabi tradition, and they argued that the Somali Mosque of Columbus has been financially supported by Saudi Arabia, but, I could not receive access to information regarding funding sources of the mosque. However, the religious practices and implications in the Somali Mosque of Columbus indicate that the Saudi-Wahhabi tradition has had a very strong impact on the philosophical understanding of the mosque.

course of this field research, particularly during the summer months, I was able to meet and interact with adolescents, attend classes with them, and conduct 15 in depth interviews[3] age ranging from 13-19 years-old.[4]

The biggest challenge during my field research was the question of accessing female students for interviews. At the Somali Mosque of Columbus no interaction of any kind is allowed between male and female students, as their understanding of Islam forbids cross-sex casual interaction. Therefore, male and female students had classes both in summer camp and weekend school during the year in separate areas of the mosque. Break times over the course of the day were also scheduled separately so that there would not be any interactions between them outside of the mosque. Under these circumstances, I was allowed to observe classes of female students though none of the female students wanted to be interviewed by me. To access data and perspectives from female adolescents at the mosque, I sought the assistance of a female colleague[5] to do interviews with these young women on my behalf.

I transcribed each interview, which was digitally recorded, and field notes. I developed a coding schema that enabled me to assess respondents' levels of commitment to the mosque as an organization, and thus the potential role of the mosque in identity formation. I coded my data for elements of family and ethnicity, clothing, time spent at the

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3 In these interviews, I was primarily interested in how the mosque has affected male and female Somali adolescents' identity formation and which identity has become more salient during and after they have attended the mosque's activities. Therefore, I prepared semi-structured interview questions which sought to explore these adolescents' life journey up until they started attending the mosque, their participation level in the mosque and its activities, their social and religious negotiation in and out of the mosque, and finally how they currently identify themselves in terms of their ethnic, religious and national affiliations.

4 Eight of the adolescents were males, and seven of them were females. All of them were ethnically Somali; eight of them had immigrated to the United States from Somalia and one from Uganda and two from Kenya before the age of 5, four respondents had immigrated by the age of 12, and none was born in the United States.

5 She was from the Sociology Department of Ohio University who had studied Muslim women in America and had experience doing interviews with Muslim women over the coursework of her studies.

mosque, emotional attachment of adolescents to teachers in the mosque, religious and social activities, friendships organized around the mosque, and future plans regarding religious commitment, all of which in varying ways illuminated the degree of adolescents' commitment to the mosque.

Findings

Based on both the participant observation and in-depth interviews conducted at the Somali Mosque of Columbus, two distinct trends in adolescent identity formation emerged: *identity transformation* and *identity conflict*. In the "identity transformation," Islamic identity is more salient to respondents than their Somali or American identities. Those Somali teenagers evidencing "identity conflict" struggled to reconcile their commitment to being Somali Muslim with their experiences as young Americans. In both trends, the mosque has a crucial role: in the former, it is the primary cause for those whose Muslim identity becomes salient, and in the latter it deepened identity conflict for those adolescents going through.

Identity Transformation

"Before they (adolescents) come to the mosque, they are Somalis.

After they come to the mosque, they are Muslims."

Abdurrezzak, Teacher, the Somali Mosque of Columbus

Identity transformation in this research resulted in a change in respondents' identity salience hierarchy. In the Somali Mosque of Columbus, *most of the adolescents* (10 out of 15) experienced change in their identity salience hierarchy due to the role of the mosque in their lives.

These Somali teenagers typically began their journey to the Somali Mosque of Columbus under parental pressure, since many of their parents viewed forcing their children to attend the mosque as one way to compel them to maintain Somali Muslim identity. However, after initially attending the mosque reluctantly, adolescents who underwent "identity transformation" began to find that greater engagement with Islam brought greater joy and personal meaning into their lives. This emotional connection to Islam was facilitated by a growing sense of closeness to family, leaders and friends at the mosque, as well as a sentimental attachment to the mosque itself as a social institution.

Osman, 15, said "in the beginning, my parents made me. But after that, I liked it. I loved it. I had fun. We basically mix fun and learn something new. Before I was forced but now I love it."

Adde, a 15-year-old high school freshman, was initially very afraid to attend the mosque, but after interacting with its personnel and teachers, he changed his mind:

> To tell you the truth, I cried. I did not want to come. I did not. I was scared of being whipped. I bawled my eyes out. I came to the door and wiped my eyes. And (teacher) came to me. I then had a different perspective of him. He became my family. He is like my second parent. He's both a mother and a father.

Not only did significant social bonds develop from attending the mosque, but a deepened sense of Islamic commitment and satisfaction with Islam as a way of life develop among the adolescents who underwent "transformation." For example, Eva, 14, who was at a refugee camp in Kenya before having come to the U.S., felt that Islam helped her develop inner-peace: "For me, Islam gives me peace and I feel like I'm doing it for a reason. Every time I do something, I ask myself 'Am I making Allah proud or not?' It gives me peace and tranquility."

This peace and tranquility of which many of the teenagers, particularly the girls, spoke of, was often cited as a means of coping with the challenges of being a teenager. Preeti, 18, a senior in a high school, who came with her mother to the US from Somalia as a baby, said that her faith in Allah helped her counter the troubles that many teenage girls, Muslim or not, face in high school, such as low self-confidence: "For me, Islam has helped me a lot where it hasn't been that difficult in school. I put my trust in Allah, I do good and Islam is there for problems/difficulties." Like Preeti, the other teenage girls maintained a strong sense of self-esteem, even when they were targeted for being Muslim. Latuschka said, "In middle school, someone once pulled my hijab. It was horrible, but people are ignorant. I said to myself 'I'm better than that.'" When asked if these things bothered her, Latuschka replied "no, it did not bother me."

Even though the female respondents have sometimes faced gendered discrimination and stereotypes from non-Muslims because of

the way that they dress, their strong belief in Islam and Allah has motivated them to endure any issues that they have faced in navigating American society. After sharing how she had experienced prejudice and stereotyping, Eva indicated that she was able to remain centered through Islam:

> Well, I was walking on the street and there were a group of girls who were walking on the other side. I heard them saying something like "see what's she wearing?" in a different way and laughing. I didn't look at their direction but I know that they were talking about me. For me, Islam gives me peace and I feel like I'm doing it for a reason. Every time I do something, I ask myself "Am I making Allah proud or not?" It gives me peace and tranquility.

It was clear from interviewing these students that many of them looked to Islam for happiness and confidence in life, as Latuschka indicated: "Islam is perfect and amazing. God always forgives. He has mercy and he's my first and only friend. It's for all generations. It's universal." Islam seemed to be a very important factor in their lives and they depended on Islam for every hardship they experienced.

What is striking is that respondents who experienced identity transformation consistently said that they became more tied to Islam after attending the mosque and its classes, even if they started doing so reluctantly. Islam became their most salient identity, such that they identify with their Islamic religious identity, over their ethnic Somali or black American identities. Latuschka, a 14-year-old ethnic Somali who was born in Kenya and came to the US when she was 2 years old, said that: "I don't call myself Somali or American, but I'm Muslim" and stated that "I think religion is more important than culture. And it's great. It's such a good thing."

Muhammad, 15, pointed out that he was more religious than what his parents were comfortable with:

> Before I came here, after school I used to play soccer with kids in my neighborhood. I didn't use to pray 5 times a day and my mom didn't use to tell me anything. But now after school I come here (mosque), and my mom tells me why don't you come to

> home? Religion is more important for me. But for my mom, it is not that important.

Muhammad seemed to imply that the older generations were more cultural Muslims, since they learned religion in Somalia rather than in the mosque, and although they learned about Islam through their culture, they have learned the incorrect way of practicing the religion. Latuschka had a similar view point of the older generations. She stated that "here, the older people are more cultural Muslims, you know. They think that even children playing in the mosque is *haraam*[6] and yell at them. That's not right. But the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) used to let the children play in the mosque."

Some parents, like Hafsa's, 18, a senior in a high school, did not enjoy the freedom she had to be very active in the mosque. At Hafsa's home, my female colleague noted that her father had high blood pressure and expected her to cook. She stated: "He wants it exactly on time. I can't be one minute late. If I am late, he gets really mad. When we wake up in the morning for prayer, he expects his breakfast right at that time. But I don't care. Sometimes I don't cook. I don't care". Hafsa did not care that her father was forcing her to fit into being a traditional Somali woman. From what Hafsa said, she was more interested in reading books than cooking because "*Ilm*[7] is so important". She is more interested in marrying a man "who is educated and who is in religion". She also stated that "my parents make fun of me because they say that whoever you marry will think you are nice, but he's going to leave you because you can't cook."

Sometimes, Hafsa could not go to the mosque because she had to stay home and do housework, even though she did not want to. For Hafsa, Islam and the life of the Prophet Muhammad were much more important than what her parents culturally believe to be true. For instance, after Hafsa mentioned the first marriage of the Prophet

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6 *Haraam* is an Islamic term which refers to forbidden acts in Islam.

7 *Ilm* means knowledge or science in Arabic. Here, it refers to the Islamic knowledge and its sciences.

Muhammad[8] in the interview, she shared the discussion about marriage that she had with her mother saying, "I like a brother who is part of the *masjid*[9]. I told my mother that I like this man, am interested in marriage and that I think we should send a *mahram*[10]. My mother said "NO! A girl doesn't show interest in a man first. The man has to show interest first." Hafsa loved Islam so much and wanted to follow every aspect of it, but her parents were more focused on her maintenance of traditional Somali culture. She wanted to read books, go to college and become a scholar, since the Prophet of Islam had encouraged people to get knowledge.

With the Muslim identity the most salient in their identity hierarchies, adolescents in this group reveal *the third way* for Muslims in the US: To what extent could they pursue their dreams in the post-9/11 United States with their most salient Muslim identity? Following the relevant responses to this question finally indicated two opposing groups in this category: *Integration vs. disintegration/distinction* with the American culture and society. The former indicates to integrate into the host society with the Muslim identity which could exemplify *the third way* for Muslims in the US, whereas the latter signifies a full rejection of and isolation from the American mainstream culture and identity due to salient Muslim identity.

Muslim and American: Dimensions of Ethno-Religious Integration

Adolescents in this group believed that integrating into the American society does not conflict with their salient Muslim identity. However, because of the inter-generational language difference, adolescents and their parents sometimes experience cultural conflicts that left the adolescents feeling "guilty" for being integrated into the American culture and potentially losing their Somali ethnic identities. The adolescents said that even though they "felt" Somali, they were more comfortable in the American culture, where they grew up. Many said that

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8 In the first marriage of the Prophet Muhammad, Khadija, his first wife, sent him a marriage proposal.

9 *Masjid* means the mosque.

10 *Mahram* is a relative or escort who will carry the marriage proposal.

they were "modernized," and that integrating with other Americans did not threaten their commitment to Islam. However, although they had integrated into the American culture and articulated a confidence that they could remain Muslim in America, they still did not identify as "American."

Some adolescents felt that growing up and being educated in the U.S. made them more fitting in American culture than in Somali culture though they identify themselves as Muslim first. Abdi, 15, said "I came [here] as a little kid. I'm losing more of my (Somali) culture and gaining more of culture here. You spend time with friends here. In Somalia, you spend more time with family. Here you spend more time with friends." By contrast, Adde, 15, who identified himself first as a Muslim, indicated more pressure to "fit in" with Somali culture. Reflecting on his own cultural adaptation to the norms of the U.S., he noted:

> I'm losing Somali culture. When I speak to Somali people who are straight from Somalia, old people, it's different. Most kids are born here. You'll notice how people straight from Somalia go to shops and say like "I don't have the money today, I'll give it to you tomorrow" and just take stuff. People don't do that here. If you want something, you gotta have the money. It's funny for me because it's Somali culture. I think I'm losing the culture because of American culture.

It became increasingly clear when discussing their long-term aspirations that the Somali American teenagers in this research not only perceived much of integration as benign (i.e. paying for products rather than just taking them with a promise to pay tomorrow), but that they saw it as necessary for pursuing future success. Adde would like to be a cardiologist and a teacher in the mosque. His future goals have been influenced by his role model, the director of the youth program in the Somali Mosque of Columbus. Referring to the director in the mosque, Adde said that:

> he's finishing the college this year. He's working for the *dunya*[11] and he's working for the *akhirah*[12]. He's following the *sunnah*[13]. I also want to work for this *dunya* and get good with *akhira*. I don't want to put all my effort in *akhira* but also *dunya*. I wanna go to 4-year school. Medical school. Cardiology.

Adde's family was also supporting his integration into American society and his future plans. One of his brothers was studying medicine and encourages Adde to go to medical school as well: "My brother wants me go to college. He is going to 4-year college and going to medical school. Two days ago, he came back from Iowa. He's trying his best to go to Harvard."

However, this pattern of integrating into the broader culture while retaining Islam was a largely male one, and highlighted a key gender difference among the Somali teenagers' approach to identity negotiation. The males wanted to go to college and pursue a career, but almost all of the female teenagers wished to seclude themselves from American culture.

Distancing away from the American society

The female Somali adolescents who attended the mosque dressed in long black *abayas*[14] and waist-length, black headscarves. They covered themselves with a headscarf and an *abaya*, including girls as young as three years old. They were socialized to never wear pants, except under an *abaya* because they interpreted the *hadith*[15] stating that women should not wear men's clothes; they perceived pants to be men's clothing, and therefore did not wear them openly. Many of the teenager girls went as

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11 *Dunya* means the world in Arabic. In this context, it means worldly affairs in the modern secular world, excluding religious affairs.

12 *Akhirah* means Here-After in Arabic. In this context, it indicates any type of religious affairs.

13 *Sunnah* means the sayings, attributes, and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad in Islam. It is the second religious source and authority in Islam that Muslims follow, after the Holy Quran.

14 *Abayas* are loose black robes that cover from head to toe.

15 Sayings of the Prophet Muhammed.

far as to wear a *niqaab*[16], in large part due to the influence of the imams and directors of the mosque who studied Islam in Saudi Arabia.

Hafsa, 18 years old, stated that even though she was attending the mosque and wearing the *niqaab*, her parents were still struggling with fears that she would become "American" and get into some sort of trouble as a result. Many of the adolescents said that their parents did not speak much English and socialized almost exclusively with other Somalis, while the teenagers themselves often felt closer to their American peers than to their parents. Hafsa said that:

> My parents don't really trust me, you know. They get scared. Sometimes they just keep calling every minute, because they think we're up to *something*. When me and my sister go out together at a mall, when we come back, [her father] will ask each of us separately about the details whether they match up. We ask him "don't you trust us?" I think he's so scared we're going to be American.

Nura, 18, a senior in a high school, also wore the *niqaab* and believed that the influence of American culture on her Somali peers was more negative than positive. Some of her peers even tried to deny that they had any "American-ness" in them, but Nura said: "Well, the thing is American culture has affected us. If someone says that American culture hasn't affected them, they're lying."

It was also the case from the interviews that the parents of the female research participants were much more worried about the influence of American culture than were the parents of the males. Parents evidenced a pattern in which they encouraged their sons to go to college, while the female teenagers' parents were very anxious that the American culture might influence their daughters to lose both ethnic and religious values. Hence, many of the teenagers, particularly the females, wanted to distance themselves away from the American culture. A key dimension of why the adopted this orientation to American culture lay in how they interpreted Islam. They believed that the incompatibility

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16 The *niqaab* covers the face with a slit open for the eyes.

between some American norms and some Islamic norms meant that they had to distance themselves from American culture.

One obvious difference between female and male respondents was that the female respondents wore the *niqaab* and because of this expressed feeling like outsiders at high school and in society. However, this discomfort in public did not translate into a dislike of the *niqaab* itself. Rather, *niqaab*-wearing female respondents framed it as a practice that reflected their deepening commitment to Islam, and they found support for the practice in the teenage girls' youth group at the mosque. Latuschka, 14 years old, said that: "I wasn't always into the religion but [the group] changed all that. Before I wore the *hijab,* but I didn't act upon it. And I had memorized the Qu'ran but my heart wasn't in it."

The teenage girls' group was started by a 19-year-old female Somali adolescent in the mosque who knew what "they were going through" according to Latuschka. The teenage Islamic group functioned as a support group to help the female adolescents share their issues with being Muslim, and Somali in American culture. The group was not only for religious activities, but also was used for discussing the teenage girls' personal issues and concerns that they could not share with the older Somali women in the mosque. Latushka said: "It's a group of sisters who got together. Like a youth group. Teenagers who got together for the sake of Allah."

In addition to providing the girls a "safe space" in which to share their concerns and struggles with balancing their Somali, American, and Islamic identities, as well as the regular issues most teenagers face, female adolescents in this research reported the positive support of the sister group and the mosque for wearing the *niqaab* in the American society. The adolescent females who practiced distancing as an identity management strategy initially only wore *hijab*, and later exchanged their bright headscarves for the black *niqaab* and *abaya*, which reflected the intensification of identity transformation that they have experienced. Amina, 18, said that being a Muslim and dressing in *niqaab* made her feel beautiful. She was prepared to wear the *niqaab* even in the face of potential discrimination: "I feel like a queen. I mean, I love the *niqaab.* It's so beautiful. I wish I could walk around with *niqaab* but parents say that I'll get discriminated against and it will hard in America. I don't care though." My female colleague was told by other respondents that once a

girl joined the "sister group," she would soon experience transition to wearing only black *abayas* and *niqaab*, as though this outfit was the group's uniform. Amina also clarified that:

> I used to not follow the religion. I used to wear like normal clothes. But then I started following Islam and I used to wear bright beautiful scarves. People used to say how they like them. But I started reading more about Islam, I joined the sister group and I started wearing black *abayas*.

My female colleague noted that the little girls and pre-pubescent girls wore very bright, sparkly headscarves, whereas the sister group (who were teenagers) were conspicuous by their black *abayas* and *niqaabs*, since black symbolizes the concealing of women's sexuality, avoidance of worldly desire, and is often a sign of uncompromising "asceticism". At one point, a 12-year-old girl was studying and reciting Qur'an in class and she had been wearing bright colored scarves. The next time my female colleague saw her, the girl had started wearing only black. When my colleague asked about this girl, she was told that this girl had joined the sister group. The purpose of this brief discussion is not to focus on the girls' clothing as an issue itself, but demonstrate that the change in appearance is an indicator that the mosque's sister group strongly influenced the teenage girls' intensification of a very particular form of Muslim identity as the most salient among their many identities.

Another indicator of how the Muslim identity had become the most salient one for the female adolescents was their interaction with males. In classes, adolescent girls were very enthusiastic about learning and were modest in the way they sat or asked questions to the male teacher. Some girls had their back turned to the male teacher and when asking a question, they covered their mouths with their *abayas*. In both classes at the mosque and the sister's group, the girls were taught that they should not show their *awrah* (charm), including the voice and laughter, in public. When asked why these girls have turned around and covered their mouth, Leeya, 16 years old, said that it was for the sake of modesty.

The female adolescents were also taught that they should not have any kind of interaction with males, and they should dress and speak in a manner that avoids attracting male attention. During the summer,

the mosque organized its first youth convention, which lasted for three days and took place at a university near the mosque. There were speakers invited from across the United States to give lectures to adolescents on Islamic topics. At this convention, many of the female teenagers wore *niqaab* and long gloves that completely covered their hands because there were many Somali male adolescents in the hall. During one noteworthy speaker, the female adolescents at one point were also told to wear *hijab*[17] in a way that strongly criticized Muslim females who do not do so, speaking strongly and directly:

> When a woman takes off her *hijab*, it is open defiance. This is one of dangerous of sins. What could be sinful of women exposing her beauty to everyone in public? Likewise, my sister who guards her chastity, I give you the good news from the One who created you. Allah says, verily to him we will give them a good life and from this provision, Allah will give you on account of *hijab*, a good and pious husband, with whom you will live a good life. Likewise, when you wear *hijab*, you protect yourself from the curse of Allah. It will protect you from hellfire.

The female adolescents were taught that wearing *hijab/niqab* was their identity, which caused them to be more disintegrated with the American society because *hijab* was a tool which separated them from non-Muslims. In the same convention, the female adolescents were told by another speaker that "a woman should feel that this *hijab* is part of her body. It is what testifies. Everywhere you go in this world, you can tell difference between Muslim women and non-Muslim women. It has become identity."

Some teenagers did not follow the sister group's "uniform", by wearing short *hijabs* which were more stylish and trendy. From what my female colleague had been told, short *hijabs* were not proper. A Muslim woman must wear the long *hijab* and a skirt that covers their feet completely. This interpretation of Islamic modesty was so strong in the mosque culture that nobody talked much to my female colleague, only slightly wearing *hijab*, until she also started wearing the same kind of

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17 *Hijab* means headscarf in Arabic.

Somali Muslim outfit, with long *hijab* and a long skirt that completely covered her ankles. After that, all the women were more open to talking to her. While many Muslim American women wear *hijab* and are actively integrated in American society through work, school, and/or community life, for the teenage adolescents in this research, having no interaction with males and adopting the black *hijab*, *abaya*, and sometimes *niqaab*, functioned to distance the girls from the American society. Thus, unlike the Somali American youth who developed an integrationist orientation that enabled them to participate in the broader society, the disintegrators stayed within a secluded small mosque social network.

Moreover, teachings for other religions have increased their seclusion to the point of having enmity towards other religious groups. Even though Islam has the foundation of being close to Judaism and Christianity, the teenagers were taught that only Muslims were the privileged ones. Leeya stated that from her understanding of Islam, she had to hate the other Abrahamic faiths. She said that "we're supposed to hate the Jews and Christians. Allah says to hate the Jews and Christians". This exclusive teaching was being taught to the both female and male adolescents in the mosque.

My female colleague noted in one lecture that the teacher sitting in the chair who was a Somali man around his mid-thirties said that according to the Qu'ran, only Muslims would go to Heaven and others would go to Hell. Some females turned around and asked again for clarification. He confirmed that indeed, Muslims would be the only ones going to heaven. It is obvious that the teacher had influenced their understanding of Islam because many of the girls referenced him as an Islamic authority in interviews.

The impact of this exclusive teaching in the mosque could also be observed in reactions of women in the mosque towards non-Muslim visitors. My female research colleague stated that one of the adolescents told her that there was a woman who had come to the mosque to visit and had been interested in Islam, but Somali women had yelled at the woman who entered the mosque in a non-Islamic outfit. The adolescent girl told my colleague that "some women come here because they're interested in Islam and they're looking around. But then, some of the Somali women go up to them and get mad, saying "Why is your hair

uncovered?" Even my female colleague, herself a Muslim woman, was scolded for wearing pants the first time at the mosque.

Besides considering other religions as the enemies of their Islamic identity, some of the female adolescents also felt that the American society had *fitna*, or trials, that were against their understanding of Islam. The female adolescents in this research did not want to compromise their Islamic identity, anywhere. Some did not even want to attend college because there was free-mixing of sexes. It was clear that they wanted to distance themselves from the American culture completely. Aziza, 19, a *niqaabi* who came to the United States at an early age stated that "I'd rather stay home after getting married. I don't want to attend regular college because there is free mixing (of sexes). I want to take online classes. I'd love to stay at home all day and homeschool my children." Aziza said that she did not feel the need to go outside at all, and was very content to live out this interpretation of Islam.

When my colleague asked the girls about having American friends, most of them said that they did not have American friends. They were at the mosque all day except for the times they were in school. They took their Muslim identity very seriously and did not think that having American friends would help with their faith. Latuschka said that "most of our lives are inside the *masjid*[18], not outside. People hang out with friends here at the *masjid*. We don't really have American friends that much."

It is critical to note, however, that the Disintegrationists were not all female. The male adolescents in the Somali Mosque of Columbus had different reasons for not being integrated into American society than the females. First, outside of the mosque males did not symbolize Islam with their clothing. They just had to wear *kameez*[19] and *kufi*[20] in the mosque when they attended classes or religious programs. Unlike many of the

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18 *Masjid* means mosque in Arabic, she refers to the Somali Mosque of Columbus.

19 *Kameez* is a loose suit with long sleeves and a tunic like shape that covers the thighs, with slits to allow the legs to move. It is worn in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Middle East and etc. It symbolizes modesty in men.

20 *Kufi* is a traditional short rounded cap worn by men.

women, they would not potentially face discrimination or stereotyping from others on the basis of their clothing. However, some male adolescents thought that it was "useless" to cultivate non-Muslim friends. Othman, 14, who had also become religious after coming to the mosque, said that he did not want to talk too much to non-Muslim Americans because he might feel angry against them and get in a fight: "I don't really like [American friends] because they are ignorant. They talk about my culture and religion a lot. I ignore them. My teacher [in the mosque] says that's the right thing to do. If I make fun of them, I get a sin."

Some male respondents echoed the concerns of some female respondents by asserting that American culture and society was "*fitna*"[21] and against their Islamic identity. They struggled against being influenced by Americans, and these respondents sometimes spent so much time at the mosque that it sometimes interfered with their family life. Muhammed, 16, who developed his Muslim identity after attending the mosque, told me that:

> American culture is *fitna*. It is against Islam. That's why I spend most of the times in the mosque. Sometimes mom's complaining about me. She says 'I miss you. Why don't you come to home?' Sometimes I sleep in the mosque because we clean the mosque.

Some adolescents, such as 17-year-old Ahmad, consciously distanced himself from non-Muslim Americans because he perceived them as lacking faith in God/Allah. Ahmad, who is a senior in a high school, felt that actions directly reflect faith commitment, and considered the American culture as having low faith in God:

> If you have low *iman*[22] and you go to school, someone of your friends do bad things. You also do bad things with them. If you have high *iman*, like more of American culture, they respect that I'm Muslim. You also fear Allah a lot. My religion is number 1. It is my top priority.

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21 *Fitna* means chaos, upheaval in Arabic. In this context, it means anything which is against the Islamic law.

22 *Iman* means faith in Arabic. It refers to Islamic faith in this context.

Like their female counterparts who "disintegrate" from American society, the male adolescents in this group have different future plans than male adolescents who were integrated into the American society. They did not like high school and could not wait to graduate, at which point they aspired to enroll an Islamic college in an Islamic country such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, or Egypt. Their goal was to study Islam and Arabic and to ultimately become Islamic *sheikhs*.[23] After they obtain an Islamic education, they would like to go back to the United States in order to preach and teach Islam. One factor that has influenced this decision was the admiration many of the male adolescents had for the director of the youth program and the *Imams*[24] in the Somali Mosque of Columbus.

Indeed, all of the religious figures in the mosque have studied Islam and Arabic in the Middle East, and their role and authority have affected male adolescents in the mosque. In discussing school and career plans, Muhammad indicated that he strongly wanted to go to Yemen to study Islam because his teacher in the mosque studied there:

> I hate school. Instead, I study Quran everyday [for] 4 hours. After school, I wanna go to Yemen and study Islam like my *muallim*[25]. After then, I wanna go back here and teach like him.

Ahmad, 16 years old, also would like to go the Middle East to study. His main goal was slightly different than Muhammad. He did not even want to pursue going to college in the United States because he thought that he would be able to have a strong Muslim identity abroad in the Middle East learning about Islam. "Here I am memorizing Quran but don't know what it means. I wanna go to an Arabic country so I can learn Arabic and understand Quran better. So I can be a better Muslim."

Overall, the majority of adolescents that I interviewed have developed their Muslim identity. After they attended the Somali Mosque of Columbus, their Muslim identity has become the most salient one in the identity salience hierarchy. The adolescents who have experienced

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23 *Sheikh* means authority or scholar in Islam.

24 *Imam* means religious clergy in the mosque.

25 *Muallim* means teacher in Arabic.

some form of transformation in their identity salience hierarchy divided into two groups. The first group has been integrated to the American society, whereas the second one has started to separate itself more widely from the larger American society.

Identity Conflict

When you are in school, you're a different person.

When you come to mosque, the masjid is different.

Like how you dress up. How you act.

Ali, 16, Student

In immigrant studies, identity conflict refers to "a broad range of conflicts associated with simultaneous membership in two distinct cultural groups" (Stroink and Lalonde 2009:45). In the case of Somali adolescents, there are two distinct racial/ethnic identities that they must negotiate: Somali-Muslim and black American. Adolescents in this group felt that they did not feel as in touch with their Somali-Muslim identity as other students in the first group, and they typically did not disclose their religious and ethnic identities to their non-Somali and non-Muslim peers.

Othman, 16, stated that "nowadays I've become more Americanized because of the people (American friends and personnel in the school). Parents keep telling me what has been going on in Somalia. They tell me what's going on. They help me staying connected with culture."

However, even though Othman indicated that he had become more Americanized, when asked whether he fitted into Somali or American culture, he said that he was fitting more with the Somali culture. One statement reflecting this ambivalence in his identity is that: "It's the way that I act. Like wearing a *kameez*. I eat the same food as Somali person. Most of the times, I eat Somali foods. I speak Somali language a lot. That helps me feel Somali." Othman self-identified as "Americanized," yet clearly maintains a salient ethnic identity by eating the foods, speaking Somali, and wearing ethnic clothing.

Unlike their more religiously and ethnically-identified peers whose identities were shaped meaningfully by the mosque and who were there willingly, adolescents in this group felt pressured to go to the

Somali Mosque of Columbus, and this pressure increased their feelings of conflict between the Somali-Muslim and American cultures. Ali, 16, who moved to Uganda after leaving Somalia and came to the United States just a few years ago, did not remember Somalia because he was "just a baby". He did not express salient connection to the Somali culture, but was attending the Mosque to appease his parents. When I asked him whether he felt pressure to come to the mosque, he replied that: "They wanted me to come to mosque. They force me to wake up in *Salat Fajr*[26]. They always wake me up at 4 in morning."

Ali only attended the Quran study class even though the mosque provided a wide range of religious programs such as Islamic lectures, memorization of *hadith*, and a Quran memorization competition for students. He also said that he spent most of his time at home playing soccer with non-Somali friends, who did not know of his Somali and Muslim identity: "They don't even know that I'm Muslim. We go and play. That's it. They think I'm black. African-American. We just play". Ali did not want to tell his friends about his identity, showing that Islam was not the primary factor for him. He was experiencing identity conflict, where he was struggling both against American cultural influence and Somali-Muslim culture.

Ali also told me that he had a girlfriend from his school and they just talked on the phone, despite the interpretation of Islam that characterized the mosque's orientation. Given the very strong emphasis on separation between sexes at this mosque, having a girlfriend is clearly verboten. When asked what other Somali Muslims would think about him having a girlfriend, he said that:

> Well, everyone has a girlfriend. When you're in school, you're a different person. Like, when you come to mosque, you act differently but when you go to school, they're normal kids. The *masjid* is different. Like how you dress up. How you act.

In spite of his compartmentalization of his Islamic identity, Ali still indicated that: "[Islam] means everything to me. You have to do

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[26] One of the obligatory prayers that Muslims are supposed to make before dawn, according to Islamic law.

what Islam says. You have to follow it. That's it." According to the interpretation favored by his mosque, "Islam says" that one ought not have a girlfriend, and Ali is well-aware of this perspective. His identity conflict manifests in a tension between his asserted beliefs and his actual practices, which include having a girlfriend while also declaring a very cut-and-dry orientation to Islam.

Like the Muslim Integrators and Muslim Disintegrators, the adolescent girls experiencing identity conflict grappled with the issue of cross-sex interaction. Amina, 18 years old, indicated that "the [group] learns and everyone are sisters at the same time. They sometimes have issues with, I mean, like boys and everything. They know it's forbidden but they date on Facebook."

Latushka reported that during the month of *Ramadan*[27], some adolescents spent time outside of the Somali Mosque of Columbus in the parking lot with boys and girls freely mixing while the congregational prayer was being conducted. Some adolescents, male and female, had issues with dating and other cross-sex relationships that were acceptable to their non-Muslim peers in high school, but were forbidden in the mosque. "Well, the guy and girl usually just hold hands and the most they do is kiss." After stating this, Latushka added: "I think that they should trust the *masjid* and listen to imams' teachings because they're trying to do you good. In school, it's very hard to trust people", indicating the source of conflict between the mosque and school that some adolescents faced.

Overall, adolescents in this group have experienced identity conflict because of the two distinct social networks that they participated in. The Somali Mosque of Columbus was not the primary reason behind this conflict. However, strong and intense teaching of Islam in the mosque that is very distinct from American culture and lifestyle enhanced for adolescents in this group to have more identity conflict after they attended the mosque.

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27 Sacred month in Islam when Muslims fast during the day and have long prayers at night in congregation in the mosque.

Conclusion

The findings showed that the mosque kept the identity of many teenagers as Muslims first and then as Somalis. Many teenagers felt that they could go through the pressure of teenage life and high school with the help of Islam. The teenagers stated that they were motivated to learn more and to experience life. Many of the adolescents did not identify with their parents' culture, a common second generation immigrant experience, but being in close contact with their parents kept them connected to being Somali.

However, the most important finding was that Islam was still the strongest bond between the teenagers and their parents. Because so many of the teenagers followed Islam closely, the first generation parents did not fear losing their children to the dominant culture of America. Many parents, according to teenage interviews, were extremely glad that their teenagers showed interest in Islam, but ironically, parents were concerned that their children might be taking Islam a little too seriously. While one would expect the first generation parents to find that their children were following familial religious outlook comforting, this was not the case with my respondents' parents.

Another important finding was that Islam was a very positive factor especially in the life of the teenage girls, who felt stuck between the two cultures: Somali and American. Somali culture demands girls to be traditional and obedient, while American culture prefers that girls be modern and outspoken. Despite teenage conflict and pressures, these adolescent girls felt that Islam gave them an ability to maintain a balance between their religious identity and American culture. By having a teenage sisters' group in the mosque, they felt that they could share and vent their frustrations of being a Muslim balancing Somali and American culture. Hence, the girls committed to the mosque because of the fact that the other sisters in the group could identify with the difficulties and pressures of balancing the two cultures.

For most of the teenagers, Islam was such a strong force that they felt in touch with it, even while working in mainstream American culture. Many of the interviewees wanted to become doctors and scholars, which could lead them to success in this world and the "hereafter". They did not feel obligated to isolate themselves away from

the American culture. As long as they were sure that they would be able to apply Islamic ideas to their work and schooling, they were at ease in integrating into the American culture.

In conclusion, Islam and its institution, mosque, would be a positive catalyst for research for Muslims to develop the "*third way*" in the United States, which neither completely rejects American culture nor assimilates fully away from their religious and ethnic identities; but, rather, develop and sustain their Muslim identity as the most salient one, meaning simultaneously integrate into the American culture, which is very same how Sheikh classifies as "*mutualists"* for identity negotiation of Muslim Americans (forthcoming). This *third way* (*mutualism*) will inevitably enable Muslim immigrants and Americans to coexist without clash or conflict caused by religion. The possible threat for this coexistence would be the rise of Islamphobia and anti-Muslim discrimination post-9/11 and the inevitable reactions of Muslims against this attitude. If the United States can minimize hate movements and reactions against Muslims, it will not be surprising to see the *emergence of American Islam* and American Muslims with very distinct characteristics than the rest of the Islamic world. These American Muslims will sustain their religious identity as the most salient in their identity hierarchies; also this identity will depend upon the values and the beliefs that the forefathers of Americans hold and stated them as the basic pillars of the American society and culture. With further research, we will be able to observe distinct characteristics of American Islam along with its impacts on the American society and the world as well.

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